

Chicago - As part of her ongoing efforts to increase accountability and transparency in Congress, Congresswoman Melissa Bean announced a Congressional Accountability Initiative at a downtown Chicago press conference Thursday.

“Democracy works best with an engaged and informed electorate,” Bean said. “Without easy access to the voting records of their elected officials, Americans cannot hold us accountable. Without increased oversight and further reform of the earmark process, we are less likely as a nation to exercise the fiscal responsibility and restraint required in this uncertain economy.”

The first bill, the Voting Record Transparency Act, H.Res. 1222, was introduced by Bean last week. This legislation directs the House Clerk’s office to make available individual voting records for all members of the House, and requires members to provide a link to their voting records on their taxpayer-funded official websites. Currently, the clerk lists only the roll calls for each vote. That means constituents who want to find out how their representative voted must look up the vote on each bill separately. Some members, including Congresswoman Bean, list a record of votes on key legislation on their websites. H.Res. 1222 will allow constituents nationwide to see how their representatives are voting on every bill.

“Most voters want to be informed when they go to the polling place, but it’s currently very hard to do,” Bean said. “It’s easier for American citizens to get a consumer guide that compares home appliances than it is to compare their representative’s voting record to their own priorities. This bill provides the kind of transparency that will change that.”

“Transparency is a critical part of a healthy democracy,” said Better Government Association Executive Director Jay Stewart, who joined Bean at the press conference. “Citizens should be able to find out how their Member of Congress voted on the important issues of the day.”

The second bill is the Bipartisan Earmark Reform Commission Act of 2008, H.R. 5755. Bean was an original cosponsor of the bill when it was introduced last month by Congressman Ron Kind (WI-03).

“Federal funding requests that target local projects are a vital method for ensuring that the

unique needs of district communities are addressed,” Bean said. “But the potential for waste and abuse in the earmark process requires further reform. A bipartisan commission is needed to ensure that our tax dollars are not squandered and our highest priorities are being addressed.”

Earmark spending skyrocketed under previous Congresses. This Congress has already made strides in reducing earmark spending, cutting earmarks to \$14.8 billion in FY 2008, down from the all-time high of \$29 billion in earmarks in FY2006.

The Bipartisan Earmark Reform Commission Act would establish an independent, bipartisan commission, whose 12 members are appointed by the Speaker of the House, the House Minority Leader, the Senate Majority and Minority Leaders, and the President. The commission would be charged with investigating a number of factors relating to both congressional and executive earmark spending, including:

- Disparities in earmark funding;
- The use of earmark funding for for-profit companies;
- The federal budgetary impacts of earmark spending;
- Whether current disclosure requirements are sufficient;
- Whether a merit-based system could be adapted; and
- The effects of earmark funding on specific departments or agencies.

The commission is required to report recommendations to Congress and the President within 6 months, and Congress would be required to introduce legislation to implement the commission’s recommendations within 60 days of receipt.

“This Congress has already shown that reform is possible,” Bean said. “To advance Congressional transparency and accountability further, I urge my colleagues to support these non-partisan common-sense measures.”

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